J.P. Das



Selected Poems

This volume puts together a selection from the English translations of J.P. Das's poems written over the last four decades. These translations have earlier appeared in eleven collections—from the earliest *First Person* (1976) to the latest *J.P. Das Omnibus* (2012).

The poems are arranged chronologically as they appeared over the years in original Odia. Names of translators are given at the ends of poems where the translation is not by the poet himself.

If contemporary Oriya poetry has acquired a new dimension and sophistication in terms of vision, technical integrity and innovative use of the creative medium, it was because of Das's contribution. His passion for the diverse facets of life and existence makes his poetry vibrant and rejuvenating. The sense of rhythm that he tries to capture in his poetry is very close to the colloquial speech.

These selected poems in translation bear testimony to the many qualities outlined in the assessment above.



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Omnibus
Edited by Paul St-Pierre

Complete Plays
Edited by Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee

Selected Stories
Edited by Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde

J.P. DAS

Selected Poems

(Translated from the original Odia)



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Tel: 41603490 Fax: 011-41708607
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Some Faces

Some faces twinkle down on me
like morning stars.
Unasked, the sky sprinkles
some sympathy and compassion
like chill and dew.

Some other faces
puff up like coloured balloons
on my castoff bed.
and call me, make faces at me
teasing my lost manhood,
in sweltering lonely noontime.

Some faces scare me with varied masks
at the three-way junction
in quiet nights,
through the wind-howling casuarinas.

Some other faces
plain and pitiful

with vacant eyes
look into mine for shelter
and ask me which is the way
to go safely north.
Many more faces
with numberless eyes
stare at me
from the mirror-walls
of my magic house.
All sorts of faces –
some quite intimate
some quite unfamiliar;
known become unknown
in that crowd of faces.
I deliberately refuse
to recognize some faces;
at times I feel somewhat assured,
and happy; at times scared;
I smile a little.
Unconscious tears of my eyes
and exhausted nerves
make the faces hazy;
they disappear.
Experiences pass off;
faces fade away.
Only agony remains;
some rain, some road, some loneliness.

Translation: Debà Patnaik

2

The Mask

I treasure many masks: for day and night
and evening; for a moment of happiness;
for the last act of the tragedy;
for guest and fellow-traveller, one time lover
and her husband, emperor, soldier and whore;
for the sorcerer and the funeral procession;
for exiled sky and startled dawn;
for love and for deceiving; for defense.
Holding different masks over my face,
I change disguises for every phase of life.

I sought a mask in the scant blue of whose eyes
maidens would fall under my spell;
sensing the slight firmness of my lips
enemies would acknowledge defeat;
at one glance, every bird in the sky
would wing into my cage;
I'd call for night, and the sun would drop.

That mask was never found; all masks of mine
are only small surprises, trivial smiles,
morbid pleasure and sullen arrogance,
feeble cries, impotent anger; my masks are merely
a little love and parting's common grief.
Under these masks, I know, I honour guests,
recite mantras, make love to wife and mistress,
speak with the skies, watch the stars,
and lose myself easily in a throng of people.

And my age increases from one mask to the other,
from one deceit to another.
From the depths of disguise, some try
to recognize me, while others
who know me behave as strangers;
if at times I lose my identity,
I try to find myself, I look at walls:
masks lined up row after row,
and bits of scattered broken glass –
it is meaningless to question a mirror.

Translation: Jayanta Mahapatra

3

The Dream

In a dream, I saw last night a dove fly down
and place a colored flower in my hand.

Around my bed my countless desires
slept huddled together,
waking, like rows of girls,
and falling asleep again; night thickened
around the profusion of leaves and in the owl's eyes.

While the bird stared at me
from a branch of some tree, I imagined it
suddenly growing huge as a garuda,
rushing at me, trying to claw my eyes.

So I searched for the moon behind the hill:
so many hills, twisted and crumbling;
jostled trees, broken rock, and, beyond
the temples' pinnacle, the silence
of centuries in the colorless sky;

the moon like an adze. One by one
the morning's stars went on committing suicide.

And I saw again a forest of flowers:
vines like snakes, petals shaped like tongues.
The loneliness stifles whatever little light
of night crawls into the many hollows of the earth –
the flowers black, the butterflies
everywhere silent and dead.

Hands bloom like flowers
amid swarms of birds; all night
I seek myself
in another's dream.

Translation: Jayanta Mahapatra

4

The Corpse

Someone's lifeless body lies in the street
surrounded by people.
Many simply walk past,
others cannot bear to look at it;
one's step falters, another falls silent,
and another shuts his eyes at the sight.

One passes by reciting mantras along the street;
for whom did this child pluck flowers?
Who laughed here,
who stretched out his arms
to put a halt to time,
and whose screams were lost
in the deserted street?

In the light's rush upstream,
someone was lost on the way; the heart's
many dreams were ground to ash.
Someone sighs deeply.

Someone measures out life
with a burning candle,
and another finds his own way
in the half-light.
The people have all gone;
the street is deserted, laughter extinguished
in the endlessness of space.
The corpse still lies in the middle of the street,
and I lie fast asleep on a lonely isle.

Translation: Jayanta Mahapatra

5

Goddess

You appear in the vacant
moment of midnight,
you are the ordained goddess
of my secret yearnings,
of my blood and veins,
of my flesh and body.
Your throne is all my helpless wishes,
your temple-columns my defeated desires.
In the dreadful hour of nightmares,
you are installed.
In the forbidden city lanes
you are worshipped.
You chants echo and re-echo
in auction cries of slave markets.

This is the last night of my waiting;
in the last act the hero is killed,
all your familiar lovers have fled.
No priest in the temple,

no waves in the ocean;
nothing is left of smiles and moonlight,
the temple arena is empty;
everything is quiet today;
tonight there is no one at all.
I wait for you and pace up and down
the portals of your presence, all alone;
look, I am your last samurai.

Let your conference with the dead end.
Come to my dreams
with your tinkling silver bells.
Let everything be extinct today;
let the temple be razed to dust.
Let the nights burn away in body's pyre.
Let darkness of sight,
sound, shape engulf everything.
Let your hands be octopus and crush me.
Let your feet be a pillory and clasp me.
Let the ten petals of my palms be gashed
by the cactus of your breasts.
Let your body be quicksand and devour me.

Translation: Deba Patnaik

6

At the Stroke of Six

You made a promise
we'll meet at the stroke of six,
at six in the evening and none but us,
the two of us at the city limits,
the evening would be just for us
and time would stop sharp at six.

When you went to the sea-beach
with someone the other day
the sun set suddenly;
the mermaids got frightened;
castaway ships stalled in mid-ocean;
the waters flamed like fire
and flowed blood red;
I was robbed of my time
and then on my sick-bed from dawn
to dusk and dusk to dawn,
in my fevered sleep,
there were no dreams
and no memories for me.

There will be evenings yet
and there will yet be you,
with the sunshine of
silent mornings in your breast,
your arms aching with midday's pain,
your body besieged with
the mysteries of darkest nights,
your eyes twitching
to the excitement of traffic lights.
Would you look for me
on evenings like these,
with your hand on your breast,
cravingly on your disheveled bed?

This evening,
there will be sacrifices yet;
battles and bloodshed;
a dagger in the lover's hand
a scream on the heroine's lips.
There will be death for this evening
and resurrection too;
some making up
and some suicide pacts,
on this anniversary of
the beginning and end of love.

You made a promise
we'll meet at six,
at the stroke of six

the two of us,
just we two in the lonely evening,
as if it were the last day of our lives
and there is to be no redemption tomorrow.

But look,
how hostile everything is!
The sky has turned crimson;
there is a strike in the city;
protests and processions,
there are prohibitory orders against us;
the city limits are oddly crowded today;
the clocks have all stopped at noon.

Only you and me here,
it's six in the evening;
only you and me
and the city's awe-struck populace.

7

Looking for Myself

Looking for myself
I know I'll meet you some day,
suddenly close to me.
Not much will be left of the night,
the imagined distance between
the need for you and your proximity
will be nonexistent,
all my search and endeavour
will end surprisingly.

Everything will be in a shambles,
with layers of dust and cobwebs,
the sky riveted to the walls,
the room littered with torn letters,
my legs tired, my hands inert,
with winter in my body,
and desert fire in my head,
warm blood staining the sheets,
my breathing feeble at the final hours.

But there will be you by my side,
incarnate in my whole being,
your body stretched out on my neutral bed.

There is hurricane in your every breath,
lightning in your every touch,
your mouth is a volcano
and each kiss its explosion,
your eyes flashing the revolt
of ejected meteors.
I will forget everything
and leave my house
without a forwarding address.
I will search for myself again
on the outskirts of the cremation grounds,
amidst penitent hermits
and in the desexed existence
of passionless celibates.

I'll go from one pilgrimage to another;
I'll be engrossed in the contemplation
of nabhi padma kundalini and brahma;
I'll renounce in the Triveni waters
the last props of my existence.

With rejected love letters in my hand,
shriveled flowers
and a photograph of the dead,
I'll be looking for myself,

all alone on many a road,
the blood of the first sun
spilling on the tarmac,
the sky's cadaver lying
on the cremation ground,
rows of empty houses weeping
on both sides of the unending road,
the horizon silent and the winds riveted
to trees and dry branches.

In those weary last moments
I'll meet you again in such loneliness
while I deceive a little and comfort some
in my irate duality.

8

Waiting for You

Someone did tell me
that waiting was death,
but waiting for you –
mornings and evenings
get compressed to noon,
creating the illusion of a whole day;
yet it's really a colourless existence,
this fear of death and the wish to be
obliterated in sheer waiting.

The stone statues you see
in the museum of time –
you can tell them your secrets
in your own private tongue;
you may call them names
if you like
in anger or in fear;
you can burn them down
with your glance

or ignore them with a gesture;
you can lock your eyes in theirs;
you could even go close;
but the guide says, no,
they are not to be touched
you may only speak to them.

Words and words only.
Floods of language
and gales of patter.
Attempts to make contact
with alphabets.
Trying to share relationships
with vowels and consonants,
and to record confessions in codes.
But when it comes to the end,
beyond the exit door,
the speechless silence you meet
is only of renunciation.

Someone did tell me
waiting was death
but waiting for you
is a prolongation of living.
Or is it a misunderstanding?
Is it that you promised to come
another day, another time?
Or maybe you're waiting for me
eagerly in another city.

I'll read your letters again
and once again in your memory
I'll ask strangers about you
and of your wellbeing.
Though the knocks on the door
will be for my neighbours only,
I'll listen to each footfall
with needless anxiety.
They will be outsiders all
but in the hope of your reply I'll wait
though it will be other names
nagging my memory.

You did say life was love,
but waiting for you,
living itself is reason
enough for living;
life its own meaning and approval.
Life that is sometimes happiness
sometimes sorrow,
experienceless existence sometimes,
a restless sequence of happenings
where days are mere
inseparable mornings and evenings
where noon is a symbol
only of the passage of time.

Life is love you had said
but in the sequence of living

time's bare museum echoes
only flawed relationships.
So I'll keep on looking at the roads;
I'll search for your face in the crowds;
I'll read your letters again
and I'll wait eagerly in my own
private death wishes,
for someone did tell me
waiting was death and so
waiting for you.

9

Till the End

My strange existence this–
shuttling in space
and floating on the sea
from time immemorial;
suspended amidst the revolution
of moon sun planets and stars.
Sometimes I overtake
the onslaught of the waves
swimming upstream.
Sidestepping the meteors
sometimes I let myself
float with the milky way.
Screaming as I drown
I fly helpless sometimes
in the whirlwind.
At other times I sleep peaceful
on the floor of ocean or sky.

Your face shrinks in my hand sometimes
and looks helpless into my eyes.

At times your face expands
in a glitter of lights
and I get lost
in the pupils of your eyes.
We walk hand in hand sometimes,
I drag you to my bed;
I play with you a few moments
and then I sleep on your palm
for aeons on end.
There is a twinkle in your face
and the slice of smile grows–
it's now a crescendo of laughter.
In the wild winds
I fly about like a leaf
in that gale of laughter.
You glance at me for a moment
and I burn for years
in the smoldering fire of your eyes.
When your eyelids close
everything subsides;
time remains still
and I get lost in the body's night.

There are no oceans
no skies no storms
no rains no fires nothing.
All quiet peaceful calm and static.
Indifferent priests chant away hymns
in muted monotony

of unintelligible words.
I reminisce through the pages
of my abridged journals
recorded in three short chapters.

The black stallion gallops
across the diffused clouds,
the clip-clop of its trot drowns all else.
The rider laughs
and chunks of forest and sky
shake to the beat of his laughter.
Crowds gather with heads bowed
fear and disbelief in their mute eyes.
Dazed I look for the polestar
from side to side
in the twitching eyes of lightning.

What I supposed was
the colour of your sari
were only shattered clouds.
What I thought was
the vermilion mark on your head
was the setting sun.

So I touched my face my chest my eyes,
faithfully I read out the pages,
I signed on all the dotted lines,
I scanned all in a sidelong glance.
I took your name a hundred and eight times
and finally fixed my gaze on you.

All misgivings of the night materialized
to melt in the understanding
of the soft morning sunshine.
It's now unbounded peace
now only a long wait for me.

10

After You Leave

This is our road's end.
It's time to take leave
to go our own ways
at this crossing.
Even before I could understand you
and fathom your body,
even before I could
share my secrets with you.

The road stretches far,
but at this crossroad
our relationship was cruelly aborted.
I was left behind on the platform
while your train steamed away
to some unknow city.
The moments we spent together
were exiled for good.
This road stretches far I know

but I have to get back
unless the road engulfs me completely.

Even after you leave,
the crossroad will remain neutral.
The generals will stay alert
on their stone mounts.
Silhouette birds will stay put
on the telegraph wires.
Windows will merely look up
at the tissue paper moon
to dream of a caesarian sunrise.
Lamp-posts will shiver
at the thought of impending gloom.
Then the palm of night will wipe off
the platform in a flash.

The whole room is engrossed
in the memory
of the unforgettable final moments.
Echoes are frozen in remembrance.
Window panes are all broken,
door curtains all drawn.
Only the shadow of your memory
flits about in my bare room.
The cold wind blows across the door
and nudges me hard.
The dead bird gets pale and cold
inside the bolted cage.

I resign myself.
Let the house burn down,
let it be auctioned out,
for though the house is mine today
tomorrow it belongs to none.
The telephone keeps ringing
and I let it ring on
involved as I am
in my many symbolic deaths.

It's midnight now,
there is none in the auditorium.
Only the clown is on the stage,
his head bowed in the last act.
The lonely bird beats its wings
against the ceiling of the godless temple.
The penitent with his severed head
lies prostrate on the cold pavement.

There is a queer kinship
between the end of life
and the transient but lovely flesh.
We'll therefore be sitting in a row
the penitent and the clown, hand in hand,
in search of immortality
at time's last frontiers.

The sari will flutter
and then will be seen no more;

the jingle of bangles will become faint.
Distance and darkness
will soon blot out your face.
When I remember you
from five hundred miles away,
your feet will stop for a moment,
your thought disturbed a little;
there will be some flutter
in remote hamlets
away from the stations.
Some birds will get lost in the storm,
some will dive into the grey pools of memory,
some will remain helpless on your lips
and in the slight quiver of your fingers.

I'll remember you effortless thus
and then I will have no fear
of death or immortality.

11

Six Hours

The six hours spent with you
were squeezed into the cyclop eye
of the train engine,
then vanished in the lonesome dark.

What fraction of time are six hours?
Can they be stretched?
Who can confine in a train compartment
compressed relationships?
For that matter,
how can darkness be nailed to the tree?
The wide island of angry clouds
awakened with a single call?
Or the intimate moon plucked out
from the blankets of winter mist?

The six hours will return
like escapeless echoes.
The six seasons will come back

from the death defying valleys of love
to the dream islands
on estuaries of fairy tales.
Where will you then go away
with the rains in your eyes?
I'll find you easily
in the ashes of dead stars.
I'll gather you from
the winter-tipped dew drops of memory.
I'll search you out
amid the weird vestiges of nightmares.
All the pathways of my search
would converge on the precipice of your body.
Wherever you choose to descend,
I'll be waiting for you there.

When the abstract darkness
gets busy talking to the dreams,
we'd take the last train
to the valley of the stars.

12

Who Knows How Much Time

Who knows how much time
adds up to eternity,
how many moments make an aeon?
Who can estimate
the extent of infinity –
is it by arm's length
or by light years?
How does one calculate perpetuity–
in minutes days months years
or decades and centuries?

What is the measure of time–
split seconds or past present future?
What can hold the tide of time–
stop watch or history?
The rail lines towards the future
are complete in their own parallel run.
The train crosses
station after station,

horizon after horizon,
void after void.
The traveler looks at his watch
and content, goes back to sleep.
Ghost stations fly past
through nightmares.
The late night express flits
from platform to platform.

All the entrances are locked.
Unseen hands behind the counter
give out tickets
for the onward journey;
there is no time to look back.
Uncertain trains
are forever whistling ahead–
from morning to night
from conscious to subconscious.

The telegrams intimating arrival
are all lost;
and there is no one on the platform.
It is an alien land
seen only in nightmares.
The train stops on the deserted station
habit-bound for a moment
and then steams off
vanishing in the distant smoke.

Signal after signal
along the way
red follows green follows red;
the express train shoots through alarms.
The traveler does not know
how much is traversed
and how much yet to go;
how much time spent
and how much left;
how many ideas make for completeness;
how many instants make an age;
how much time to go
till the sun burns down;
and where to put your markings
between the stations:
on the museum walls
or on the calendar page.

At the last station,
Time waits with his finger
on his lips,
fulfilling all the promises
within himself.
But the meteor is worried
as it hurtles down;
how many moments is it
to eternity?

13

It's Another Day Gone

It's another day gone
under your magic spell.
The day-break on your face
is a morning of soaring birds
and shimmering beaches;
a morning of pink sunshine,
of curtains shivering
in whispers of soft breeze
and chanting mantras.

As the sky gets lonelier,
the sun is now molten silver;
feeble sighs get lost
in echo-less abysses.
The meditating lone tree
is reflected on the sun-glass.
A brooding grey loneliness
descends on the landscape.

The shadows lengthen
in the breeze;
snatches of blue spread
on the flowing music
of the stream.
the afternoon oscillates
lazily in the intimacy
of forgetfulness.

There is no sign of
recognition in your eyes;
a golden sunset
settles on your forehead.
All the roads end there.
The sky is again deep blue
and a million stars twinkle
as darkness pervades
through every window of your face.

14

Goddess of My Grateful Glances

Oh, goddess of my grateful glances
I worship you on folded knees.
It is you I sing hymns to,
oh, the last hope of my orphaned future.

You know all about me:
my incapacity for sin
my hesitations for virtue.
How my loving is helpless
in a strange impotence.
How my faithless promises
are steeped in pity.

My ordained goddess,
when you have distributed
your universal love
to all in equal measure,
oh, repository of all divine powers,
when religion, philosophy, history,

Rigveda and relativity
all get lost in your body,
I can assuage my fear and humility
in the protection of your eyes.
When the fragments of my being
are scattered away
in temple yards and blind lanes,
I will realize you bodyless
and outside of time.

If you appear
as the futility of achievement
at the moment of my triumph,
I will even excuse you
your divinity.

15

What do the Eyes Hold

What do the eyes hold–
only a vision of the breeze,
of expectations from the ship
in midocean ?
Where do the rains
of the night get lost–
in the indifferent generosity
of the morning,
or in the limitless compassion
of memories?
What does intellect store up–
the trivial pleasantries
of acquaintance,
or the compound of
complete experiences ?

Or else everything is in suspense–
the lull before the pigeon
descends on the magician's hand?

In the oyster-shell,
that which is neither
a drop of water,
nor yet a pearl?
A tremulous mantra hovering
on the lips?
Words awaiting articulation ?
Torn bits of paper floating
lazily around the lamp post?

While one is busy gathering
one experience after another,
each event calls up another event;
each surprise leads to
another discovery;
each milepost points to the
milepost ahead.
How could one then point to
an assigned place here,
definite and final?
Who knows in the arid expanse
how much is desert, and
how much handfuls of sand?

In such uncertainty,
journeys will be left undone
and time will be spent
only in scanning maps.
In such flights of

interim time,
what solace will make me hopeful
from the morning's doubts,
to the last sunset of convictions?
What realisations will conduct me
from deep faiths
to profound truths?

16

Beginning

In the blind alleys
of life,
chance meetings
are promises.

17

Flight

In my flight
to the future,
if you trap me
in the memories
of our past,
from which
there is no escape,
who shall I pledge
my present to?

18

Truth

No other knowledge
is expedient here
except your casual passion,
which is a supreme truth.

No other precept
is relevant here,
except your active indifference,
which is
another supreme truth.

19

Sequence

The morning calls up the noon
which blots out
the memory-laden words
from the depth of passion,
undressing dreams
in an accepted truth.

The noon calls up the evening,
where thoughts cease,
leaving only a grey sky
of limitless love
and an eternal dusk.

The evening calls up the night,
where isolated agonies
stretch empty moments to eternity,
turning love into
time made articulate.

20

Omens

The compulsions of your smile
tire out the city
in grey loneliness.

In the chorus of your words,
shadows climb down the trees
and silence the murmur
of the leaves.

The cold touch of your hand
spirits away
the intimacy of dew drops
from the grass.

Your unseeing glance
burns down the dreams
of the horizon.

Your hesitation to be
yourself to me,
spreads some more wilderness
in my dark despairs
reflected in the skies.

21

Hurricanes

Go away,
the wild wastes
in your eyes keep crying.

When I look into them,
there are no waves
of swirling clouds;
no explosion of forest greens;
there is only a hurricane.

Hurricanes do not
bring rains;
hurricanes carry only
wild wastes which cry,
go away!

22

Poets

In the arc of sunlight,
they seek inspiration
from the casual whirlwind,
though it whispers
only meaningless words.

Admonitions of time
blow away the dry leaves.
The skies look down
in a silent gesture.

The wind touches off
a spark of sunshine
on the point of the pen,
fixed in a serene moment.

Poets walk over
to the shadows and
scribble some more loneliness,
keeping time with the wind.

23

Credentials

Some day,
my vagrant past will confront me,
questioning my identity.
But I will have no name,
no country except loneliness,
no religion except
the nexus of my desires,
no possessions except
a few mementoes of pain
and wild memories.

When I reach the grey walls
of the blind alley,
I will look back at my past
from where all the roads
go back to where we met.

24

Exile

You took me by my hand
and led me across roads
paved with your love
that I had dreamt of.

We arrived at a season
made of your elements,
which answered all my desires.

But when parting comes,
in the days of our dissensions,
where will you exile me?

Where is the land
which is not the
guide book of your personality?
Where is the time
which is not the journal
of your private self?

25

End

We left laughter behind
somewhere on the way.

The meteor changed its course;
eyes stayed fixed on the mid-ocean.

The forest receded;
the lone tree stretched
its hand towards the sky.

Islands remained unknown;
the wind blew away the dreams.

The battleground is quiet now;
there are no tears.

26

Emperor

Emperor, take a walk round your palace
for the last time
during this interlude of history,
before the restless mob on the streets
devours you.

Remember now
the day of your anointment as king
and the duration of your reign;
the killings, the pillage, the bloodshed
between the coronation
and your dubious end;
between the throne and the inner quarters.

What more do you hope to see here?
Your coffers are empty,
for you have plundered your own treasury.
Your pleasure garden is scorched
by the sighs of the virgins you had abducted

to disprove your impotence.
The corpse of your favourite bird
lies dead in the cage
killed by the touch of your own hand.

Look at the spears in your armory.
These were once trees in a forest.
The sticks of dice scattered on the floor
are the broken bones of martyrs.
Look at the grinning skull on the shelf.
He was once your court jester
executed by your order.

Enter the court from the inner quarters
past the forest of spears
and the flowing blood of martyrs,
stepping on the ashes of arms
and flags and victory marches.
The royal astrologer's predictions
came all wrong:
your ashwamedha horse fell dead
at the boundary of your empire;
you had killed the concubines' children
sired by you so as to rule undisputed.
Now you have no successors left
since you had ordered the killing
of your only heir fathered by your bodyguard.

Your biographer
brought up on your left-over food
now lies paralysed.
Your ministers and counselors
have abandoned you
to join the new colonizers
in search of fresh pastures.
Your soldiers have found shelter
in the war-mongers' arsenal.
Your favourite queen
now sells her body in the leper colony.

Looking behind is no use.
Emperor, run away now
before you and your kingdom
get obliterated from the screen.
Through the secret doors
of the queen's quarters
creep into the dark by-lanes of history
after throwing your rusted crown
into the begging bowl
of the sentry at the palace gate.

Translation: Meenakshi Mukherjee with the poet

27

Mahabharat

It is not possible
to live in exile
and don a disguise
for all times;
one has to return
to one's own land.

It is not possible
to remain neutral,
for here,
war is inevitable
and one has no choice
but to take a side.

Here, in the epic of life
all is written down:
for empire and power
the loaded dice of elections;
for the destitute,

a piece of land
as large as the tip of a needle
under the Land Reforms law;
lac-houses of harijan clonies,
war-zones of farms and factories;
the chakravyuha of poverty and want,
the unfailing brahmastras
in the armory of adversaries:
and the disrobed helplessness
of the lowliest and lost.

In diplomatic exchanges,
no principles are at stake.
The old and the venerable
beseech from the young
the inheritance of youth.
Honour is surrendered
in the fulfilment
of unjust promises.
There is assault and rape
in meeting halls.
Witnesses go blind.
Chastity is made divisible.
License and lust
are universally acknowledged.

Woman is mere womb here,
perfidy is routine
and might the only right.

In the dharmakshetra of everyday life,
the siren is veritably
the blow of the conchshell
that sounds the beginning of war.
The evening does not, alas,
bring its cessation;
it's only a respite
to regroup artifices
for the battle next day.
It is a war
bereft of all principles.
In this war,
to lose is the only sin.

28

Kalahandi

Put away the road maps now.
To go there,
you do not need
helicopters any more;
wherever there is hunger,
there Kalahandi is.

The god of rain
turned away his face.
There was not one green leaf
left on the trees to eat.
The whole village a graveyard.
The ground cracked;
river sand dried up.
All the plans failed;
the poverty line
receded further.

Wherever you look,
there is a Kalahandi:
in the sunken eyes
of living skeletons;
in rags which do not
cover the frail bodies;
in the utensils
pawned off for food;
in the crumbling huts
with unthatched roofs;
in the exclusive prosperity
of having owned
two earthen pots.

Kalahandi is everywhere:
in the gathering of famished crowds
before charity kitchens,
in market places
where children are auctioned off,
in the sighs of young girls
sold to brothels,
in the silent procession
of helpless people
leaving their hearth and home.

Come, look at Kalahandi closer:
in the crocodile tears
of false press statements,
in the exaggerated statistics

of computer print-outs,
in the cheap sympathies
doled out at conferences,
and in the false assurances
presented by planners.

Kalahandi is very close to us:
in the occasional contrition
of our souls,
in the unexpected nagging of conscience,
in the rare repentance
of the inner self,
in the nightmares
appearing through sound sleep,
in disease, in hunger,
in helplessness,
in the abject fear
of an impending bloodshed.

How could we then walk
into the celebrated portals
of the twenty-first century,
leaving Kalahandi behind?

29

Fear

Fear is the prehistoric darkness
lurking in the lanes
and by-lanes of the city
when you have fifty thousand rupees
in your briefcase.

Fear is the offspring
of King Kong
who emerges from childhood fables
and beats his chest
on the roof of the concrete jungle.

Fear is the ring of the telephone
hammering the heart
in the voice of the dreaded boss
at odd hours.

Fear is the telegram
at midnight

which arrives
inside a closed envelope
when the near and the dear ones
are far away.
In the still midday,
fear is the thumping in unison
of heavy boots
in times of curfew
in the lanes of impotent men.

Fear is the hushed whisper
of tense and uneasy days
when uniformed soldiers
armed with bayonets
charge into processions
after slogans of protest
have gone silent.

Fear is the roaring
of the motorbike
emerging from the temple
with a masked face
when names have been entered
in the hit list.

Fear is the witness
of your ignominious past
surfacing suddenly in the mind
back from banishment

looking for atonement
for the sins of the yesteryears.

Fear is the imminent
possibility of death,
leaping out of the mirror,
when vacant moments of time
draw wrinkles on the face
at the indulgent moments
before the dressing table.

Fear is the tenuousness
of relationship that hangs
from the everyday discordance
eternally afraid
of snapping itself.

30

Curfew

Houses are arranged
in two neat rows
like tombstones in a cemetery.
The street lamps are in attention
like soldiers with rifles.
The siren proclaims
prohibitory orders
and heavy boots march
on the chest
of the quiet city.

Windows and doors are closed
and there is
an impossible heaviness
in the air.
Colours fade away
at the tense noon of terror.
Whispering voices of fear
cloud the sunny day.

The eventless day grows
in the blank pages of newspapers.
Blood dries
on the road surface.
Smell of gunpowder
disappears from the air.
A kite circles
from the safe distance
of the sky.

In the graveyard
of narrow streets gather
the ashes of garbage
and bones and skeletons.
Packs of stray dogs
seize the city.

With bloodied feet
the sun walks across
the dead valley of the city.
Trapped screams echo back
to the control room.
Feeble protests of sighs
get sprayed in the sky
like futile dots of stars.
Tanks roll down
the main streets
wiping off the protests
of the moonbeams.

Translation: Hrushikesh Panda

31

Gandhi

The experiments with truth
turned into slogans.
The philosophy of life
remained stuck
to the blind eyes of statues.
Success remained confined
to mere definitions.
The soul was taken over
by the gross merchandise
of opportunism.

For the establishment of dharma
war was declared.
For maintaining peace
bustees of dalits were burnt.
With the support
of devious scriptures
truth was asked
to prove itself.

The men of god
were made outcastes.
The lowliest of low
moved even further down.

There is no one now
to search for truth;
no one is bothered
about the means any more.
Everyone has his eye
on counterfeit results.
In the profit and loss
of black markets
the last capital of goodness
was squandered away.
Imperialists marched on
in search of new colonies.
Awards for peace
were bestowed on war-mongers.

The old pocket watch
cannot keep track
of the lines of poverty.
The horrors of truth
cannot be seen through
the thick pair of glasses.
The small piece of loin cloth
cannot hide the vulgarity
of limitless power.

The walking stick cannot stop
the aggressive violence
of extremists.

When the clocks fall silent
and their hands move no more,
when history takes leave,
he would come out yet again
from the confines of statues,
movies and anniversaries
and take another long stride
towards the raised guns
of a new breed of assassins.

Translation: Hrushikesh Panda

32

Mahanadi

From the thirsty lands
of the gods
it comes forth
like a joyful greeting.
Steeped in myths
it takes birth in folklores.
Emerging from
the dark caverns of history
it flows from one amnesia
into another legend
following the path of oracles.

Between the alien distances
of innocent eagerness
and far reaching feelings,
holy sounds and solstices
lose their way.
Leaving behind forest, village
and wide open lands

it gets down
to the waiting valleys
in the enchanted moment
of sonorous temple bells.
Where does it go,
to which culmination
in search of salvation?
Where does it get lost
in its serpentine longings,
in what morals
of which fairy tales?

Dissolving in nightmares,
swinging in the excitement
of exotic seasons,
floating in the rhythm
of a faraway lonesome song,
stumbling against
the chirping of cicadas,
pushing its way
through bustling crowds,
spilling over rocks,
rolling over sands,
crossing steps and ghats
in the shortening circle of
fading starlight,
leaving behind fort and temple,
it blesses the mountain
in the cool cordiality

of meadow lands,
it washes away the impurities
of settlements
in the easy affability
of holy incantations.

At some unreal time
it picks up its liquid weapon,
devastates all
in a molten revenge–
piety and exploits
of ancestors,
habitations and greenery,
life and its celebration.
And as soon settles down
in the knowledge of sin,
virtue and penitence,
grief, penury, charity and pity.
It sends death back
to its blind hole.
All is now balanced again
in the green benediction
of a tolerant earth.

Between sorrow and death,
between promise and outcome,
between possibility and success,
it rolls, glides, slithers,
merges and gets lost

but stays eternally flowing.
Beyond motion and water
and flood and deluge
it takes the limited understanding
and makes it one
with universal knowledge.
It comes out
from an abstract subconscious
and dissolves itself
in the sovereign soul
of the entire mankind.

Translation: Hrushikesh Panda

33

Bhubaneswar

There is no elation,
no excitement.
The sun rises from behind
the curtains of history,
passionless.
Beyond the air-strip
jackals go on howling.
Morning breaks in the state's capital
to the ringing of bicycle bells
and the bustling crowds
in front of fishmongers'.
Gates of offices open
to the sound of morning bells
and cymbals from temples.

The main avenue
paved with concrete
distances the old from the new.
Telephone wires

disrupt the conversation
between the yaksha
and the salabhanjika.
Neon lights obliterate
the twilight amazement of the sculptures.
Headlines of newspapers
render meaningless
even the most poignant
denouement of myths.
Festivals of pay-days
are over in no time.

Genealogy of kings intermingle
with the write-up on cabinet ministers.
On the battle ground
of the Kalinga war descend troops
of floor-crossing politicians;
and on the unpredictable days
of decision-making,
they take shelter
in the dustbins of the State Museum.

Beneath torn cinema posters
a tired cow ruminates.
In front of paan shops
the Future of the Country
stand and stare
at the Industrial Area.
Ashok and Kharavela

are evoked no longer.
Beyond the Employment Exchange,
the car stops
at the portals of a hotel.
Wheels of a rickshaw
gauge the ups and downs
of social consciousness.
Beggars emerge
out of ancient historic caves.
On archaeological rubbles
master plans are made
for a bank building.
A tourist's camera
traps the essence
of Ashokastami and Shivaratri.

Dust gathers on files.
The pinnacles of temples
go on gazing vacantly upwards.
The afternoon flight takes off.
Revolution happens
only in slogans
splashed on walls,
as clerks march out
their heads bent,
from their offices
silently homeward.

Translation: Hrushikesh Panda

34

Hiroshima

It had been
a wonderful morning;
but nothing remained the same
when the day was over.

In the exciting sky
of limitless possibilities,
there took place
an explosion of intelligence;
but alas, there was
no imprint of culture
nor any warmth of intellect
nor any dazzling
proclamation of progress.

Or was it only an infernal doom
that tears apart
the mass of land,
that soils the tomorrows,
obliterates the good omens
of horoscopes,

the fates of people,
the laughter of toddlers,
and the achievements of ages?

A robot god comes
and uproots all accomplishments,
sweeps away prosperity
and immaculations
underneath ruins,
imprecates the inheritors,
proclaims a universe
void of soul,
where power is omnipotent,
where mankind is
jut a statistics
in a laboratory
and perhaps only, hopefully,
a footnote in history.

In this one day-end,
finished and obliterated are
not only a habitation
but the entire world
and humanity
that had flourished
and had grown with time.

Our civilization today
is only forty years old.

Translation: Hrushikesh Panda

35

Historical Truth

History is nothing
but a piece of rant;
there is no such thing
as a historical truth.
Might owns right
as also history.
You engrave someone's name
on a stone slab
and he is the rightful owner
till the letters are erased.

History is a fossil
of primeval time,
its elements made out
of broken swords,
crumbling skulls,
shattered idols,
undeciphered alphabets
and scraps of paper strewn

across the archives floor–
and all these shuffled
and made to serve
any which way you like.

History can be picked up
from the ground
like a coveted crown
with the tip of the sword.
History can be auctioned
and given away
to the highest bidder.
History can be consigned
to the blazing flames
like a flimsy effigy
by a frenzied mob.
The purohit can proffer it
to the sacrificial fire.
History may get lost
in the labyrinths
of conflicting interests.

There is no such thing
as the final truth
of history.
Like a quick change artist
it changes its
colour and countenance.

Anything can be proven
and established
by false evidence,
fake records,
cryptic signs and symbols.
A stone statue can be proven
to be a figure of straw,
a mosque to be a temple,
a temple a stupa;
a hero a jester and a villain.

History has no truth to it,
it has no form of its own.
When you take away
from its face
layer after layer
of falsehoods,
you will only discover
that there is yet
another mask behind it.

36

My Next Poem

My next poem would come
from forgiving compassion
after two loves
and three separations;
it will descend
from the sky of remorse
as a prelude
to a charmed courtship.

In the pangs
of broken relationships,
the poem will come
extending its hand of friendship,
rearranging the changed affinities;
it would make
compassionate flowers of understanding
bloom on the graveyards
of loss of faith.

In some exasperated moment
of an anguished afternoon
it would come as a remembrance
of mellow memories,
echoing forgotten songs
buried deep
in the recesses of the mind.

It will come
leaving behind its accursed fate,
as unshakable faith
of propitious moments,
capturing the fickle future
and carving new fate lines
on the palm.

It will come
in the turbulent times
of famine and pestilence,
walking over the wailing
of despondent wastelands.
It will distribute
handfuls of laughter
in the free kitchens
and flood the parched mirages
with torrential rains.

It will come
in the sacrament of morning rites

chanting hymns
of peace and benediction.
It will wipe off
the darkness of dismal temples
and relieve the priests of death
of their weapons of doom.

It will come fluttering
in the wings of doves
flying past bomber planes
in a war-torn sky,
carrying messages
of cease-fire and disarmament.
It will come as cold sparks of peace
on the heaps of explosive violence.

It will come
breaking prison walls
disobeying prohibitory orders
of autocratic regimes.
It will proudly march
on streets and alleys
silenced by curfew orders,
leading processions,
shouting slogans,
and distributing fiery pamphlets.

My next poem will come
marching in step

with the peace procession
in the Noakhali of violence,
to the strains of Ramdhun
in the midst of communal carnage,
baring its chest
to hooligans' bullets.

My next poem will come
gently gleaning
arrays of adamant words;
it will come
free and fearless,
easy and eloquent,
breaking out of the strait jacket
of meter and rhyme,
in the sovereign land
of blank sheets of paper
affirming its birth right
to express itself.

37

Archaeology

History by his side,
the researcher stands
upon the arid expanse of time
rummaging through ruins
for signs from the past:
temple crests hidden under sand,
flowers fallen from idol's hands,
expeditions ordered in dreams,
snakes guarding the sleeping boy,
hoof prints of galloping horses,
jingling anklets stilled in the river,
signet rings in the fish's belly,
mementos to identify strangers.

He looks around,
his mind beset with questions–
when where why whose,
coronation, reign, war, ashvamedha,
proclamations, bequests, genealogy.

No one answers.
There are no clues.
The questions run about
from place to place
in the barren expanses
like deserters fleeing battle fields.

When he repeats the questions,
a hideous laughter
from the thirsting souls
of commoners
comes out from the caves
and the coves
and from the recesses
of the horizon
knocking against stones,
trees and the void.

Its wandering echo now orders
the sky to turn its face,
the mountain to go to sleep,
the forest to close its eyes,
and tells History,
Shut up, liar!

38

Bustee

They all come here, finally
unasked, time and again.

To this nameless slum
History comes with its
invading hordes,
passing through archways,
flying flags of triumph,
marking its conquest
with victory columns.
History demands surrender,
asks for blood and sacrifice–
warrior's blood, rebel's blood,
innocent's blood, toiler's blood.
History asks for submission,
acceptance, subjugation and loyalty.
History holds out
the threat of Emergency.

Civilisation comes here
hiding behind mask,
gun and Bible in hand,
setting up colonies,
investing money,
ushering in industrial revolutions,
bellowing factory smoke,
establishing townships,
lecturing in townhalls.
Civilisation sells yellow journals,
counterfeit goods, moonshine,
and pornography.
Civilisation doles out
drugs and venereal disease.
Civilisation demands
addiction, blind following
and obedience.

Democracy arrives
in the bustling street
beyond the poverty line,
riding jeeps
and waving flags.
Democracy demands
signatures, thumb impressions,
bribes, lies, applause,
taxes, donation, votes,
witnesses, supporters, goondas,
garlands, posters, hired crowds,

slogans, processions, platforms,
microphones, meetings, rallies,
mass movements, effigies.

To the quiet, scared, innocent street
Religion takes strides amidst
hymns, prayers and carols,
in the calls of purohit and muezzin,
wearing beard, turban and cap,
decked in vermilion and saffron,
shouting hoarsely to the glory
of the one and only God.
Religion comes with knives and sticks,
grenades and flaming torch in hand,
asking for destruction
of temple and mosque.
Religion calls for rape, arson and loot,
kafir's head, heathen's entrails.
Religion snatches away
bangles from the hands of married women,
parents from their children
honour of girls and
the potful of rice boiling on the hearth.

They come and go away
threatening to strike again.
Newspapers change headlines.
In the political horse-trading
power is auctioned away,

through elections, prayers,
riots, curfews, lectures, statements,
five-year plans, false promises,
the bustee survives them all,
like the small child
newly orphaned
playing at the street corner
still unaffected
by religion, democracy,
civilization and history.

39

Riot

The gods took their stance
facing each other
with their armies in tow,
on the innocent street.

Intolerance became a weapon;
anger fortified the hands,
hatred prodded on the legs,
fundamentalism obliterated
the simple logic of conscience.

And then,
a reign of beastly terror;
sacrament of blood,
offering of slain heads,
incense of burning houses
and the congregational prayer
of painful shrieks.

When curfew was clamped,
gods went back their way
to their ordained heavens.
Ambulances carried away
to the hospital
the wounded and the dying.
Police vans took the corpses
to the city morgues.
Wails and siren sounds
got lost in the smell
of burning houses and gunpowder.

No one noticed
the corpse lying in the drain.
He had come to the street
begging for alms.
No one knew his name
or his religion.
Now, he is beyond
all sacred texts and faiths.
It is only his dead eyes
which still keep staring
fixed and merciless
at the remorseless heaven
darkened by the black smoke
of a forlorn future.

40

Kalinga

The day gallops away
riding on horseback
over the dilapidated
rocks of Dhauli hills.
The invisible hands of Time
chronicle across the skies
the ironies of history.

Layers of legend
lie strewn across the landscape.
The fading rock-edicts
keep repeating the arrogance
of a doubtful victory.
The ancient red earth
connects one age with another.

As the echo of the last conch shell
is drowned in the wind,
the peak of the hill

puts an end
to the strategies of devastation.
The tiny flower in the shrub
lifts its head
like a veritable victor.

The silent waters of the river Daya
flow like blood.
The trees, mute witnesses,
point to the east
with their new branches.

No one wins,
no one loses.
At the break of the dawn,
weary warriors move on
to the humdrum battlefield
of their daily grind.

Leaving Kalinga behind,
wrapped in a legend,
wearing a monk's habit,
Ashoka walks towards
his own nirvana.

41

Rain

Beneath the shadows
of a helpless noon
the sun surrenders
to the overtures
of an overcast sky.

As dark clouds gather,
the obscure day dissolves
in its own meaninglessness.

A morose dream
all drenched up
leans against
the unopened door.

A gust of wind
shakes me up
as baffling questions
of dark design
assail my senses.

Hope deserts belief
as I stare vacantly
at the contours
of discrete raindrops
reflecting the doubts
in my unblinking eyes.

Translation: Durga Prasad Panda

42

To That End

I had to meet her one day–
to that end,
I was born and grew up
through childhood and youth;
I collected friends, fell in love;
raised a family, earned a living;
went through good and bad times;
visited places, gathered experiences.
And then some unknown desire
made me change my course,
I walked into the museum
where I met her.

But long before that
When Creation was yet to be,
there was the Big Bang
and the earth materialised.
Life came unto the planet
and man was born.

Through wars, epidemics and the dark ages
settlements and cities came up.
There was birth of arts and science,
literature, painting and sculpture.
The civilised man set up
libraries, town-halls, theaters,
cathedrals and temples–
and museums.

Everything was but to that end
of my meeting her one day.

43

Beggar on the Temple Street

From one end of the road
to the other
is the universe
of his disease and suffering.
The shrinking shadows
of crumbling walls,
the drain and the pariah dog
make the whole household
of his happy dreams.

His security wrapped in rags,
his present held in the broken plate,
he holds his hopeful future
in the begging bowl before him.

His eyes cannot see
the temple's pinnacle.
The temple gates
are beyond his reach.
The chariot wheels avoid him.

Incense smoke does not
fill his empty stomach.
His sighs fail to melt
the stone idol's heart.

Even so,
he bows with gratitude
for his unwanted life,
as if his living itself
was a boon from his previous birth,
as if each full meal he got
was a heavenly gift,
each time that disease spared him
was a veritable rebirth,
and each passing day
was a divine miracle.

After a whole day's fast,
he knows for sure
that his sincere prayers
will not go unheard.
After the evening rituals
god will get down from the car,
fish out a few coins
from his coat pocket
and fling them across
in a supreme gesture of piety
into his grateful tin bowl.

Translation: Durga Prasad Panda

44

The Sea

The sea is a portrait
of deep blue emotions
which reflect the core
of my innermost thoughts.

Its voice floats
through each oyster
and each conchshell
echoes its resonance.

Experiences transcend my passions
and dissolve in the waves.
I take back all my promises
made to eternity.

On the farthest estuaries
of my desultory sorrows
Time gives back to me,
one by one,
the shadowy reflections
of all my experience.

45

Konark

Here, the tourist is king,
the guide historian,
archaeologists are sculptors,
photograph albums treatises
on temple architecture,
and the camera arbiter
of the essence of art.

Glories of the past lie unguarded
strewn inside an empty bus.
Art is packaged
for sale in postcards.
Folklore hangs on strings
in roadside shops.
Tradition is interred
beneath picnic trash.

Under the wrath of jealous winds
temple sculptures crumble

like Shamba's cursed body.
Stone slabs fall from the top
doomed by their own pride
like the boy jumping into the sea.
Rest houses encircle
the vast temple courtyard
like Kalapahar's armies.
Twelve years' penance
goes in vain.
Genealogy gets lost
in wild shrubbery.

When legend calls the ships
sailing in the ocean
to come and bear witness,
the shimmering sands
silence their answers.
Casuarina trees mock them all
with a knowing smile.

After the last bus leaves,
Time resumes its reign.
Konark lifts its head
and stands proudly erect.
like the peak
with its black grandeur,
the ultimate in art,
standing on the earth,
challenging the skies.

The hearty laughter of time
silences all other sounds.
The wheels roll down crushing
commonplace successes
and trivial achievements.
And once again, till the morning,
the divine charioteer
steers the essence of eternal art
into the divinity of the heavens.

46

Sanctuary

I have no home;
I have no address.
My life is a continuous
search for refuge
in your remote continent,
where my wanderings
have torn my existence
into discrete pieces
and scattered them
among the many paradoxes
of my growing up.

Sheltered in your tresses
I have seen the night nestling there
changing with its myriad stars
the dense gloom of despair.

Hiding behind your eyes
I have seen dreams float by

towards the shores of fulfilment
consoling along the way
the wild waves of discontent.

Perched on your lucid lips
I have listened to
chants of Vedic hymns
intoned with effortless ease
bringing dead alphabets to life.

From the formidable forts
of your resolute breasts
I have seen the ironies of history
bring blossoms of promise
to the wastelands of time.

On the fertile shores
of your earnest thighs
I have seen primeval galaxies
in their progenitive pride
projecting complete constellations
into the firmament of the future.

Prostrate at your feet
I have seen the century
devastated by the anguish
of its previous birth

and its atomic fragments
pouring out of the navel
of the penitent past
and seeking nirvana
in the pores of your body.

Translation: The Poet with Paul St-Pierre

47

My World

My small word
lies suspended between
the four walls of your house.
There is a no entry sign,
yet my life, leashed to it,
keeps moving endless
round and round.

From wherever I start
I reach your house,
sure as death,
as though all roads lead
to this single destination.

It's easy to find it –
on the front lawn
winter sleeps at noon
as the spotless day
dries in the sun

like your cast-off sari.
Your pet clouds lounge
high up on the roof.
In the night,
the house is snow-clad
in mysteries.
Moonlight peeps out
through the open window,
and I know
when the other window opens,
there will be sunshine.

From my look-out
I fix my eyes on the house
and invoke you
in the ultimate measure
of my meditation.
My prayers stop at the edges
of your unmade bed,
wet memories overflow my senses;
a taste of the sea assails me;
my conscious becomes a dream
and loses all its reason.

I see blazing heaps of sand,
and your body seething
in the sultry summer heat,
I see a storm gather
and pass over the desert,

and then I see
your dishevelled sari
lying forlorn
along your undulated shores.

I see you through my many
states and aberrations –
you are the sum total
of my entire life,
its beginning, middle and end;
the three measures of time
and the four directions;
the five elements, the six seasons,
and the seven heavens;
the ten misfortunes
and the fourteen worlds.

Your house is all I have,
movable or immovable,
and I know I am destined,
like an accursed soul,
to circle it round and round
now and for ever.

Translation: The Poet with Paul St-Pierre

48

Savages

In broad daylight
the sun was stabbed to death.
The assailants
chopped it into slices
and threw them into the dark
of the filthy drain.
Beasts took over the city.
With its million nails and fangs
storm came down
and ravaged the earth.
Vultures pecked to pieces
the corpse of the day.

Wild fires swept the city
from one end to the other.
Birds were thrown out
of their nests
like sparks of fire.
The innocent, helpless animals

remained trapped
inside the circle of fire.
The shocking news
of yet another hundred deaths
got lost within
the routine newspaper headlines.

Scared alphabets took shelter
behind blood soaked posters.
History blew itself away
like charred bits of paper.

The sound of bullets came
bursting like thunder.
The sky was torn apart.
Celebration of life on earth
turned into heaps of ashes.
The prehistoric beasts
marched forward
from one street to another
over the bosom
of the burning city.

49

This Day

I dedicate this day to you,
for in my morning dream
you appeared for a moment
and as soon vanished.

There will be no other news
in today's papers;
only your face will peep out
from every column
on every page.

Today,
only your calls will come;
the letters
the postman brings
will only be yours.
You'll get down
from every taxi
that stops by my gate;

every knock on my door
will be from your knuckles.

If the world ends today
and mankind perishes,
and only a few dreams of man
are left behind,
I know for sure
that you will appear
vivid and vibrant,
in those remaining dreams.

50

At the Traffic Lights

The car moves on
smooth and well-regulated
in its mechanical perfection.
But when the traffic light
glares with its red eye,
the dream jerks to a halt;
the engine growls
with irritation.
The impatient car behind
keeps on honking
as if it wants to make it
into the next century
beyond the crossing.
Waiting behind the wheel
the bored eyes
seek out comic relief
in the bizarre sculpture
of the accident-prone car

and its chauffeur's monkey-face.
One tries to read
the headlines of the tabloid
held out at the car door,
but there is nothing
sensational there
except the face of the newsboy.

Suddenly there advances
into the rear-view mirror
a skeleton with a dead child
in its bony hands;
its screaming fingers
pierce the steel
and wipe off the daydream.
It shatters the easy equipoise,
it takes you,
in a moment,
to the perilous precipice
of your conscience
making you, all of a sudden,
think of fate and God,
and brings to your lips
lines of a forgotten prayer.

The traffic light lowers
its benevolent eyes.

The car anxiously jumps forward
wishing to get lost
in the traffic rush.
But the image
of the skeleton
refuses to leave
the rear view mirror
until the next crossing.

51

Woman

With her long dark hair
she knitted sweaters
for each one of her kin.

She fed everyone
of her family
from her own share,
going hungry herself.

She surrendered her face
and bosom to bear the assaults
of cruel hands and sharp nails.

She gave away
each limb of her body
to prop up her fragile home.

And said at last,
apologizing profusely,
that she was sorry
she had nothing more to offer.

52

Poetry Reading

It is like a poem.
Seats arranged like lines,
President's chair at the head
serious, like a befitting title.
Listeners, each an appropriate word,
arranged according to rhyme and meter,
the beautiful ones among them, metaphors.
Critics with their frowning faces
discordant like printer's devils.
The poet waits with the trepidation
of the poem's first word.

The poet has started reciting.
He stumbles upon memories
he never wanted to relive all over again.
On the grey shores of remembrance
he gets lost in the labyrinths of his creation.
Words draw him to strange frontiers
where shapes and sounds and smells

of different times
whisk him away from the present,
which suddenly has become unfamiliar to him.
He feels nothing now
except the ruthless demands of the poems
which he wrote in some distant past.

The last line of the poem dissolves
in his uncomprehending eyes.
The audience claps with a harsh finality,
and the hall is deserted soon.
The listeners spill out from the
various doors of meaning
like alphabets from the tip of the pen
bemused, charmed and silent.
They are still listening
to the words,
the sound and the appeal
of many other poems
the poet is yet to write.

Translation: Durga Prasad Panda

53

Etiquette

The dictionary lists
many synonyms:
monkey, ape, primate, lemur;
but these are not words
one would use in a poem.

Poets are known
for their hyperbole,
as also for their
sterilised language.
For portraying the body,
they use images
of lake, desert, forest,
valley and hills;
to describe a natural,
pleasuresome experience
they bring in
volcanic eruptions,
fighter planes
and surging oceans.

Poets are,
by and large,
mild, gentle and polite;
they are cowardly,
complex and conceited too.

When we are alone,
I call you monkey-face;
but before others
and especially
in my poems,
thou I call a goddess.

Translation: The Poet with Paul St-Pierre

54

Curfew in the City

With nostalgia in my heart
and longing in my eyes,
I dream of my city.
I cross the river of my innocence
and take the road to my childhood;
I stop at the crossroads of growing up
and make my way
to the city of my happy memories.

Addresses written in familiar hands
show me the way,
friendly faces beckon me;
fragments of memories
nudge me on.
And, there, suddenly before me
is the city of my dreams.

But everything seems strange
in the city I knew so well.

Everything seems to be in ruins;
the roads deserted,
the houses dejected and forlorn.
There is no warmth
in the crowd of posters;
no invitation in the peeling walls.
I come face to face
with the harsh ironies
lying in wait for me.

Unwanted sights crowd around me:
friendly knocks rebuffed
on the neighbour's door;
thirst returning from the dry tap;
childhood crying on its way
to an orphan future;
modesty hiding her tears in shame;
innocence caught between flying bullets;
amity falling down in pieces
from the broken domes.

The day retreats in disgrace;
night comes weeping
in the completeness of its shame.
Bewildered, I look at faith
stuck on the knife's edge,
dharma blasted in explosions,

conscience drowned in blood,
and justice burnt down in arson.
I have a dream in my eyes,
there is a city in my dreams,
and, there is a curfew in the city.

55

This Moment

What you are doing
this moment
in your country home,
all by yourself
in your room,
I try to imagine.

You are looking
out the window
watching the day
float effortlessly by
like an unmanned boat.
The restless noon
sails into the bubbles
of your wide-open eyes
and suddenly bursts.

You are surrounded
by relatives and friends,

leaning on the fullness
of the time gone by,
contentment in your eyes
showers grace on the grass
and plants and trees outside.
The indolent arc
of an untimely rainbow
falls at your feet
and breaks into pieces.

You put down
the half-read book;
you silence the words
seeking shelter on your lips;
you arrange your anxieties
in the stray tresses
falling on your forehead.
The radiant season
collapses on the floor,
wounded and bloody
all around you.

Your heartbeats resonate
in the flutter
of the little bird
hopping in the bushes.
Your delicate demurs
bring out colours
on the astonished petals

hiding behind the leaves.
You turn round
at a stranger's voice
and look at the wall;
you find it's only
the last silent sulk
of the setting sun
frozen in the mirror.

My many searching hands,
my million seeking eyes,
the relentless intensity
of my endless desires
merge into every atom
of your surroundings
and envelop all of you,
as you are sitting
this moment
all by yourself
in your country home
looking out the window
in complete unconcern
and devastating
with absolute ease
the delicate balance
of the entire universe.

Translation: The Poet with Paul St-Pierre

56

Never Leave Me

Unwittingly you strayed
into my life;
but how can you
walk out of it now
leaving me all alone?

The map of my life
is a complex maze
of lost pathways;
how can you ever
find a way out of it?
Open any gate
and step out,
you will find me there
waiting for you.

It's not possible
to say goodbyes now.
In happiness and sorrow,

through certitude and doubt,
in intimacy and apathy,
you are my endless blessing
as I am your eternal curse.

Cherish no thoughts
of leaving me ever.
Stay by me and affirm
my longing for life.
Place on my hands,
that are forever begging,
a few spare moments
of your abundant life;
they will not satiate
my unceasing desire for you,
but they will keep me alive
as I wait for you
from one stressful moment
to another.

Translation: The Poet with Paul St-Pierre

57

Photograph

In my regular sequence
of looking at you
again and again,
I gaze upon your face,
but your eyes
do not look back at me;
they are in the skies
of some other time,
focused on constellations
of memories yet to be born.

Your image is frozen
in a quiet setting;
nothing moves around you.
There is no commotion
in the teacup in you hand,
but all my searches shatter
in the static
of your body's contours.

I look back at you
seeking answers
to my ignorant questions:
what anxiety is hidden
in the sparks of your hair?
What does the silence
of your eloquent eyes
seek to voice?
Who does it wait for,
the patient vermilion mark
on your forehead?
Who has gifted your lips
with the unopened morning
of radiant laughter?
What hide-and-seek games
does untimely sunshine
play on your cheeks?
What are these flowers
of indolent dreams
that adorn your sari?

Your picture-face
has no answers;
but my fate turns
in the playful drift
of colours on your face.

My wants come back to me
stumbling against

the undulating negations
of your body.
The teacup in your hand
stays poised under your lips,
but a storm assails me
like a primeval reproach
repeating its torment.

I dread looking back again
at the fullness of your figure
that time has passed by.
I take my mind off your face
and hide you in my breast
so that you cannot demand
instant answers to questions
you never even asked me.

Translation: The Poet with Paul St-Pierre

58

Devi

Your whereabouts
are unknown to me
you are far away
is all I know.
You are like
the Supreme Being,
you are everyone's;
mine alone
you will never be.

You are the ordained goddess.
In the fragrance
of incense and camphor,
you are the luminescence
of offerings and prayer;
in the rising crescendo
of sacred hymns,
you are the divine joy
of deliverance.

For the penitent
prostrate at your feet
you are the precious boon
bouncing off your
many flashing weapons;
for the ardent acolyte
who has never set eyes on you,
you are the bond between
this and the other world.

You are the letter box
and the dead letter office;
you are all the letters
written for you
and their torn drafts;
you are the wrong addresses
where the letters cannot reach.
In the close confines
of domestic happiness
in the living room,
with relatives and pet dog,
you are the family's tradition
and also a wild exception
to its suffocating mores.

You are the deathly discomfort
of disturbing words
tormenting the innermost mind;
you are the pointed meanings

of an abstruse poem;
you are the life-giving balm
of the prayers which hurt;
you are the unique irony
of the many sufferings
not spoken of in the poems
written in your honour.

You are the benediction
of a displeased goddess;
you are the wrong address
on an unwritten letter;
you are the intimacy
of an empty house;
you are the simple meaning
difficult to grasp.

How can I find you–
in which house, which temple,
which post office,
what book of poems,
within what limits
of how many worlds?
And on whose dreams
shall I trespass
to ever find you?

Translation: The Poet with Paul St-Pierre

59

The Post Office

When I stand here,
disembodied images from long ago
come fluttering like scraps of paper
and scatter in my mind.
The distance of time gets tinged
by an unearthly shade of red.
Old voices arrive by the morning bus
from the darkness of forgotten villages.
Secret desires blow in
to open long-locked doors;
my lips savour the taste of boyhood.
Touched by my lost days
the nerves and sinews come alive
with the spark of an unexpected thrill.
Forgotten magic words
suddenly return to memory.

What sound is it that blows my mind,
whose form gets reflected in my eyes,

what sighs benumb my body?
Someone has come back to my life
to break down all restraints.

One by one they come to stand before me:
shades of relationships
carefully preserved in letters
and sent safely to distant addresses;
my destitution muffled in the stillness of years;
the sudden sadness of homecoming
borne on the inert wings of evening birds;
the dilemma of waiting, doubt, and agitation
wrapped in a dream.

As I search my pocket for the key,
a frayed despair pushes me from behind.
As I turn my face to leave,
the pictures splinter into many pieces.
The shadows divide themselves
to enter the premeditated slots of many addresses.
Dream-like remains of a strange red colour
blurs everything in a smoky haze.

Translation: Meenakshi Mukherjee with the poet

60

Parting

When the ground beneath my feet
was slipping away,
leaning on a few words from your lips
I got the strength to stand before you.

The fleeting warmth
of your fingers
upon my torpid hand
wiped off the darkness
gathering below my eyes
and restored my sight.

As the train pulled out,
your waving hand
traced the map of my fate
and it enabled me to find
my way outside the station.

The telephone number
you wrote down for me

will descend
from the centre of my being
to the blood and sinews
of my forefinger
with the life-giving promise
of your voice
during the passing moments
of your absence
until the time
you come back once again to me.

Translation: Meenakshi Mukherjee with the poet

61

Beyond

On reaching the river mouth
the boatman puts away his oars
although the mysteries of unknown seas
still beckon him.

Empty spaces in abundance
remain on the unfinished canvas;
the possibilities of painted skies
linger at the brush tip–
yet the artist loses himself
again and again
in the intimacy of the single cloud.

When the last line has been written,
the poet folds away his emotions,
though many words from his alphabet
hover over the page
hoping to find new sequences.

The sun has neither night nor day,
but Time, growing generous,
shows us a glimpse
of alternative ends and beginnings.
The mind measures up
whatever it can find
amidst countless voids.
And the optimist says:
this is all that you can have.

Life is not a race,
yet, in our ignorance,
we often ask who has won;
although everyone knows
that this question has no proper answer.

Translation: Bikram K. Das

62

Domesticity

Dreams boil over
above the unmindful hearth.
Dejection flying through the window
smears in a few more shades of darkness
on top of the fading colours
of the age-old walls.
The dancing shadows from the fire
wipe away in an instant
hopes hoarded in secret alcoves.

No other sound.

Eyes stare in distraction
at the bubbling cauldron,
ears alert to the faint breathing
of the invalid in the next room.

The drooping festoons of old sorrows
splash the ladle clutched in the hand,

as tomorrow's turbulence
brings to a boil
the frenzied fears of today.

Head bowed under the reproach
of the rigmarole of salt and oil
the world that never cared to inquire before
clings to the tired body at the day's end.
there is no time even for death;
the unwelcome moments
of a saltless life lie seething
within the commotion of a restless day.

No letters arrive now
from children settled in foreign lands.
Familiar faces look blurred
in the grimy old mirror.
The eyes have no more tears,
but the days of longing never end.
The fluttering cobwebs of years
nesting in each breath
keep on casting long shadows.

Nothing lasts beyond these sinking moments
when count is taken of the days that remain,
the restless night turns over on its side,
the flickering lamp winks away

in a corner of the drowsy walls
filled with distaste at its own illumination.

Drops of mourning trickle down
from leaking taps
onto the soiled utensils of the day.

Translation: Bikram K. Das

63

Poetry

People often ask about
the meaning of poetry–
even they who won't touch
poetry with a bargepole.
But then no one bothers to ask
about the meaning of Time
or the definition of Love,
or about the purport of Life.

It's for sure, as someone said,
that no one reads poetry–
neither fishmonger nor chief minister,
neither publisher nor professor.
It's also well-known
that these people are totally
unconcerned about
the rainbow and the butterfly,
about the patter of rain
and the smell of earth.

It is equally well-known
that poetry does not bring revolution.
It does not give bread to the hungry.
It cannot stop police bullets.
Poetry does not even
give a lesson in morality.
If that had been the poet's aim,
he would have taken to the streets
a gun, not a pen, in his hand.
He would have raised battle-cries
and instead of writing poems
he would have coined slogans
and formulated morals.

Even they who read books
usually keep away from poetry.
However, there still are
some moon-struck people
who do read poetry.
They read a poem and create it too
along with the poet,
and breathe life into it.

A poem is only for him
who, without understanding it
in a first reading,
bravely gives it a second try.
The meaning of a poem
is only that much

which, through doubts and incomprehension,
crosses the frontiers of the eyes
and enters the innermost recesses
of the reader's mind.
The poem's reason for being
is only that which one understands
through its ambiguity and obscurity
and nothing more.

A poem is somewhat like love
or like time, if you please,
it's fulfilled in itself.
A poem demands nothing,
it does not aspire for anything.
It is its own trial and realization;
its own content and expanse;
its own relevance and justification.
The poet, himself self-created,
creates its meaning
and also its obscurity.

A poem happens
beyond figures of speech,
beyond simile and metaphor.
A poem is above grammar and spelling
and punctuation marks.
It is free from the tyranny
of professors, critics,
theorists and interpreters.

A poem exists in its own sovereign land,
itself its lord and master.

No one reads poetry,
not even she
for whom the poem was written.
One might then say
that poetry is of no consequence
and has no relevance to life.
That's true.
But then,
come to think of it,
what is life itself
but a few obscure lines
of some stray poem?

64

Living by Memories

Memories swarm, unrestrained,
out of the bewildered darkness
floating aimlessly
in the twilight of the present
where nothing ever happens.

Ignoring eternal regulations
they come like unwelcome strangers
dead, long lost,
forgotten friends of my childhood
wandering freely,
all resentment forgotten
through the empty spaces of the heart.

Burning afternoons of past regrets
are relieved
by the comfort of reassurance.
Carnivals of merriment enliven

the gloom of sullen imagination.
The ashes of feeble words
engender flowers of poetry.
Unpremeditated verses
swing in celebration
in dreamless voids of pain.

Time in front of us, time behind–
the mind finds itself gripped by time
while the hands of the clock
are trapped behind the pallid walls
of the day's timetable.
Colourful digits roam about
searching from one day to the next.
Among the unrecognizable faces
crowding faded photographs,
new faces, known and unknown,
forcibly enter;
their little stories merge
into the larger narrative
creating a strange reality
where fact and fiction, right and wrong,
sorrow and joy are indistinguishable.

The one living by memories
finds it impossible to descend
from the shattered columns of Time.

He knows quite well
that memory is awareness
and awareness existence,
and that where memories end
the truth of living begins.

Translation: Bikram K. Das

65

Self and Other

I am the unknown face
waiting in the mirror
who, looking into my eyes,
straightway demands
the settlement of past debts.

I am that envious individual
who travels with me on the bus
to the office each morning.

I am this pitiful insignificance
which I observe with tender eyes
at the end of each deceitful day.

I am the emptiness
which I yearn to connect
to the larger deprivation outside.

I am the elusive sound of vowels

whose absence
makes my words indistinct.

I am the unformed outline
of ideals that change their shape
even as I try to recognize them.

I am drops of sweat–
those fragments of impermanence
with which I try
to construct my transient well-being.

Above all, I am the burden
of past traditions
whose impossible expectations
make me impotent.

Translation: Bikram K. Das

66

House Sparrow

Emerging from the twilight of dreams
I look out to find
perched on the window-sill,
sculpted out of the thin darkness of dawn,
a living shadow of well-being.

Bearing the morning's tenderness on its wings
it hops around the fringes of my consciousness,
flying away suddenly through the void of the senses,
into the innermost solitude of the mind,
opening up horizons of forgotten experience
carting away the sticks and straws of despair
into dim corners.

Dividing up space into tiny squares
it holds the sky open to my eyes,
forcing the vision towards light and discovery.
The single straw clutched in its beak

shows clearly the map of future events.
Leading me out of the house
it introduces me
to the regeneration of blue and gold
after destruction by unseasonal weather.

And in the chirping and twittering
I hear whispers of intimacy
which only the fading stars share with the sky
at some mystical moment.

The sparrow flies into the house–
from room to room it flits
from unknown to known,
forgotten to unforgettable,
a chain of possibilities linking past and present.
Diving into my bookshelf
it ferrets out meanings
which I have yet to discover,
showing me my unknown identity
in the mirror.
Out of my radio it churns out songs
that no one has heard before.

Then finally,
as if to pass on some maha mantra,
it flies straight into the whirring fan

and falls–
the debris of an unhappy memory
shaking me rudely out of my dreams.
Those tiny sparrowfeet on the floor
reveal to me in an instant
the wider truths of life
flying in through the window.

Translation: Bikram K. Das

67

Tourist

My first morning
in your city.
I wake up and look
for you by me side,
though I know
it is many years
since you are gone.

I go out in search
of memories
you left behind.
I walk the streets
your feet once trod.
I look at the houses
on either side;
they are still disturbed
for one day
you overwhelmed them
with your casual glance.

I enter the park
even now heavy with blossoms
where your gracious fingers
touched its trees.
I look at the sky
which remembers you still.
I find the clouds
in a grand design,
the way you arranged them.

In the shelves of stores
where you shopped
I find vacant spaces
you left behind.
When voices assail me
in the market place,
they have the arrogance
of having touched your lips.

Wherever your feet fell
is now a tourist site.
When the blind alley,
illuminated by your
one time presence,
beckons me,
I seek refuge there,
in the snugness of the wall
on which you once leaned.
The warmth of your breath

hovering in the air
will redeem me
from my imperfections;
I will take in
through all my senses
the essence of your being
blended into the elements
of your city.

You are everywhere
in the entire city,
enchanting its earth and sky.
The flowers of the park
echo your spontaneous laughter.
All silences reverberate
with the strains of your voice.
The temple sculptures
carry your delicate contours.

Your handwriting is etched
in museum inscriptions.
Every ordinary house here
is a grand monument,
and history is emblazoned
in each everyday event.

You lived here once;
so there is in this city
no discontent,

no ugliness, no disorder.
Every open door welcomes,
every stranger oozes warmth;
every outstretched hand
seeks friendship.

When I take leave
of your city,
I'll look at the crowds
in the fading light of dusk
and see the people
as you knew them once,
their charmed faces
flush with a tenderness
of the happiest memories
gifted to them by time.

Translation: The Poet with Paul St-Pierre

68

The Daffodil

Neither the teacher
in the classroom
nor his confounded pupil,
nor the westward-looking scholar
has ever seen it with his mortal eyes;
yet the daffodil,
fluttering and dancing
in the breeze
in its golden arrogance,
flashes upon their inward eye.

The empire may have perished
like a short spring,
but the daffodil lives on.
The empire may have dried up
like the rain
or as the pearls of dew,
but the daffodil lives on

tossing its head
in a sprightly dance.

As lively and fresh now
as in the golden age of imperialism,
its glory remains untarnished
in the ruins of the empire.
In the emptiness of lands
ravaged by cultural invasions,
the daffodil shines and twinkles
like an eternal star.

Through the open windows of the mind
winds of subculture
from upstart foreign lands
rush in and blow us off our feet.
The daffodil shines as ever before
in its shameless arrogance
in the inward eyes
of our very own intellectuals.

69

No Islands

A leaf falls
and there is turmoil
in the outer space.
The line on your palm
moves a fraction
and stars and planets
change their course.

The gentle quiver
of the rolling waves
in a faraway sea
caresses the wings
of Siberian birds
on their long flight
to warmer lakes.

Blessings from the lips
of farseeing prophets,

from across light years,
brighten up the future
of children yet to be born.

Bullets flying in Sarajevo
cross countries and continents
to hit the unknown man
walking the peace march
in a distant land.

Unremitting hunger
of Somalia and Kalahandi
shows up on dining tables
of air-conditioned homes
in affluent cities.

Virus from cast off cadavers
threatens the complacence
of the bluest blood.
Sighs of the third world
turn into nightmares
and disturb the slumber
of metropolises of the world.

There are no islands.
The whole mankind stands

hand in hand
in an unbroken chain
awestruck at the anguish
of the weakest
and the lowliest man.

70

Pokhran

It is not easy
to find the place.
To reach Pokhran
you have to make sacrifices.
You have to leave behind
your human values
and reasons of living.
The road to Pokhran
is built on
history's wasteland
of hunger, suffering
and deprivation.

On the way of Pokhran
there will be Kargil;
if you walk on
towards a blind future,
Hiroshima is not
far beyond Pokhran.

Pokhran is the burning cavern
of Krishna's mouth
in his world-image,
where killer Times rules.
There is no possibility
of any life form
in its poisonous environs,
and here
extinction is the norm.

The ruthless lustre
of blinding effulgence
plucks away vision
from the eyes.
In the explosion
of a million suns
the creation becomes dark.

Life ceases beyond
dead waveless seas
and flaming skies.
From the remains
of smoke and ashes
kalki comes
wrapped in devilish laughter
riding the dark horse
of devastation.

The poor ordinary man
out for his livelihood
stands stunned
before the carnival
of blazing lights,
and at the end
of the unreal day
returns to the starving dark
of his tumbledown hut.

71

After Gujarat

After Gujarat,
will there be poetry?
Was it possible
to write poetry
after Alexandria was burnt down?
After Auschwitz,
after Hiroshima and Vietnam,
after the Emergency
and Babri masjid,
after 9/11 and Iraq?

It's not possible
to banish poetry.
Poetry comes back effortless
to Plato's republic,
to Stalin's Siberia,
to Pokhran and Kalahandi.
Poetry follows
the footprints of violence

as it chronicles
the descent of man.
Like history
poetry has no end.

Poetry is written
despite fatwa and bans.
Poetry laughs at Gulag,
ignores the censor's blue pencil
and the fundamentalist's frown.
Poetry is written
against the backdrop
of bonfire of books.

After Gujarat
there will be poetry
about Gujarat itself.
It will begin
with the shame of Ayodhya,
and track the bloody trail
to Godhra to Gujarat,
on to Mumbai.

When Babri rises again,
poetry will affirm
that temples are built
not with blood-scribed bricks
and stones carved with hatred,
temples are built,

like poetry,
with imagination and faith
in the hearts of men.

After Gujarat,
poems will be written
to affirm the truth
that there is no Ayodhya
outside of the poet's
epic imagination.

72

Country

1. Patriotism

Looking for a job
to feed his family
the slum kid
after being rebuffed
by many locked doors
enlisted in the army.

And in no time
was martyred
on the strange soil
of a cold Kargil
before he could face life.

2. Treason

Birds do not sing the national song.
Rivers do not flow

on the straight lines of maps.
For the farmer in the field
there is no holiday
on the fifteenth of August.
The man fighting with life
forgets the tune of vande mataram.

This volume puts together a selection from the English translations of J.P. Das's poems written over the last four decades. These translations have earlier appeared in eleven collections- from the earliest *First Person* (1976) to the latest *J.P. Das Omnibus* (2012).

The poems are arranged chronologically as they appeared over the years in original Odia. Names of translators are given at the ends of poems where the translation is not by the poet himself.



J.P. (Jagannath Prasad) Das is an eminent poet, essayist, fiction-writer and playwright. His books originally written in Odia have been widely translated into Hindi, English and other Indian languages; his plays have been staged in many languages in different parts of India. A Ph.D. in Art History, he has authored several books on Odishan art.

He was a member of the Indian Administrative Service which he left for full-time research and creative writing.

He is recipient of many honours including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Saraswati Samman for his books of poems.

Born in Odisha in 1936 he lives and works in New Delhi.

If contemporary Oriya poetry has acquired a new dimension and sophistication in terms of vision, technical integrity and innovative use of the creative medium, it was because of J.P. Das's contribution.

— *Kavya Bharati, 1997*

[J.P. Das's collection of poems] is authentic poetic expressions in new metaphors.

—*Mulk Raj Anand*

There is no self-indulgent practicing here; form and language suggest a strong, mature personality.

—*Nissim Ezekiel*

His poetry is universal as true poetry should be and ranks with some of the best in any language.

—*Vassilis Vitsaxis*

The world that J.P. Das creates is both magical and historical, lost and redeemed.

—*Mary O'Connor*

J.P. Das's is a poetry of concern, of dread and angst in a world growing darker day by day ... its virtues are to be sought in its moral earnestness and its faithfulness to the gruesome reality of our times of torment.

—*K. Satchidanandan*